2: Mountford E-5 (1954) 1958
OI20 Tiwi OI20

CHAPTER I

The Art of the Tiwi

1. THE ART FORMS

ALTHOUGH Melville Island is separated from the mainland of Australia by the Dundas Strait, only fourteen miles in width, the art forms on either side of this swift-running tideway bear little resemblance to each other. That of the mainland, of which the bark and cave paintings of Oenpelli are typical (Mountford, 1956, pp. 112–264; Spencer, 1928, pp. 802–24), is representational, and among the most decorative art forms employed by the Australian aborigines, while that of Melville Island is highly formalized, and cannot be interpreted without the aid of the artist. In this respect (although they employ different motifs) the art of the Melville Islanders resembles that of the aborigines of Central Australia (Mountford, 1937, pp. 84–95).

2. MEDIUMS OF EXPRESSION

The aborigines of Melville Island,[5] like those on the mainland (Spencer, 1928, p. 793) painted designs on the inside of the sheets of bark that made up their wet-weather shelters. Basedow (1913, p. 320, Pls. 19–20) figured bark paintings he collected from bark shelters on Melville Island, and Campbell (1834, p. 151), referring to shelters he saw near Fort Dundas (Punata), in Apsley Straits, writes, "Some of them were ornamented with figures drawn in white pipeclay; one, in particular, was neatly and regularly done all over, representing the cross-bars of a cell."[6]

Under normal tribal conditions, however, it is in the carving and painting of the elaborate burial poles and the ceremonial spears, coupled with the decorating of the large bark baskets, that the aborigines of Melville Island find an outlet for their artistic efforts.

The effect of the *pukamuni* burial ceremony was evident in many of the bark paintings collected on the expedition. For example, Pl. 3D, Pl. 54F, and Pl. 54A, are essentially the same designs as a Melville Island artist would use to

[5] For the sake of simplicity I will, in future, use the term, Melville Island, or the tribal name, Tiwi, to indicate the Melville and Bathurst Island culture, both of which are part of the same tribal unit.

[6] This would have been a design similar to that on bark painting (Pl. 52D).

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